

CORONAVIRUS

Free Resources

● LIVE UPDATES

SYMPTOMS

WHO'S HIRING

YOU ASK, WE ANSWER

STATE LOCKDOWNS

Coronavirus Clears Out Campuses, Stinging Small Stores in College Towns

Abrupt loss of customers leaves owners struggling to pay the bills; one is selling 'bakers bonds' near Texas A&M



The Texas A&M University campus in College Station, Texas. Small stores in college towns are among those hard hit by coronavirus.

PHOTO: TEXAS A M UNIVERSITY HANDOUT/SHUTTERSTOCK

By *Charity L. Scott*

March 24, 2020 7:30 am ET

The coronavirus pandemic has ushered in an indefinite spring break for businesses in towns like College Station, Texas, home to one of the nation's largest campuses in Texas A&M University. Once-dependable revenues have evaporated overnight, leaving some owners wondering if they will have to close their doors for good.

David Fox owns two bakery cafes located less than 10 minutes from campus and a third 20 minutes away. Keeping the Blue Baker open means losing money every day, even after temporarily shortening hours at the location closest to the college.

“The only reason we’re open at this point is for our staff,” said Mr. Fox, who employs nearly 100 people. “The reality is for most of our staff members, they’re living paycheck to paycheck, and that’s pretty normal in our service industry.”

CORONAVIRUS

Free Resources

● LIVE UPDATES

SYMPTOMS

WHO'S HIRING

YOU ASK, WE ANSWER

STATE LOCKDOWNS

gift cards with an added enticement that customers can earn “interest” on any unused balance that the bakery will pay in cookies.

RELATED

- [One Nursing Home, 35 Coronavirus Deaths: Inside the Kirkland Disaster](#)
- [Grocers Stopped Stockpiling Food. Then Came Coronavirus.](#)
- [Countries Roll Out Restrictions to Curb Coronavirus](#)
- [As Economic Toll Mounts, Nation Ponders Trade-Offs](#)
- [Detroit Landlord's Small-Business Survival Plan: Free Rent Until July](#)
- [Senate Fails to Advance Coronavirus Rescue Package for Second Day](#)

The abrupt disappearance of most residents in college towns this month—as schools suspended classes and [students returned home](#)—provides a glimpse of the damage that many small businesses could face as cities across the country tighten travel policies or [restrict activity](#) to combat the deadly respiratory virus.

Brazos County, where College Station is located, issued a two week shelter-in-place order starting Tuesday at 9 p.m. until April 7. Restaurants will be permitted to stay open, but only for pick up and delivery.

Federal officials say they are developing programs to provide financial assistance to small firms, but some have already been forced to close.

Lucy’s Coffee and Tea has served mostly graduate students and faculty members from the University of Alabama at Birmingham School of Medicine since 1993.

“I was a bawling, blubbing mess at work, because it made me feel like I didn’t even know what’s gonna be in two weeks, three weeks,” said Lucy Bonds, the shop’s sole proprietor. “Was I having my last day at my shop?”

Ms. Bonds decided she couldn’t afford to stay open. “I am the smallest of small businesses,” she said. “I don’t have any money in reserve. I have last week’s payroll to meet, and I have \$3,500 in

my account right now. That's all I have.”

The final week of payroll cost her \$1,400. She's asked her six employees to file for

CORONAVIRUS

Free Resources

● LIVE UPDATES

SYMPTOMS

WHO'S HIRING

YOU ASK, WE ANSWER

STATE LOCKDOWNS

really small businesses like mine,” Ms. Bonds said. “People think sometimes that just because you own a business, that you have a lot of money, but you don't.”

Christopher Lampo, who owns a fine dining restaurant near Texas A&M in Bryan, Texas, was looking for ways to keep his restaurant open for take out and delivery, but decided to close the restaurant for 30 days after paying his monthly sales taxes, which were due March 20.

“It's their money, we just collect it,” Mr. Lampo said. “But when you're scrounging for every dollar, it's difficult. So we gave the money to the state of Texas instead of our employees.”

Christopher's World Grille, which employs 70 people, has a kitchen and staff large enough to make hundreds of meals every day. Mr. Lampo said he's trying to reach out to local and state government to let them know his facilities are available.

Belender Wells, co-owner of Fargo's Pit BBQ in Bryan, which is also in Brazos County, kept her dining room open until the town ordered it shut. Now, Ms. Wells said she's looking for ways to diversify the family business, from adding a drive-through window to selling their barbecue sauce online.

Ms. Bonds, meanwhile, has a friend helping her design Lucy's Coffee & Tea T-shirts, hoping she can sell a few online. “It might be a collector's item at this point,” she said.

Write to Charity L. Scott at Charity.Scott@wsj.com